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AUTHOR King, Cecil
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ABSTRACT

As educators, we need to get beneath the museum approach to Indian life so that we may give our youth the wisdom they desire to deal with modern life in pride and dignity. Since our present educational system has proved incapable of aiding our youth in their search for meaning, it is good to hear Indian people saying "We want to control our schools". It can be done. The knowledge we seek is still alive on the reserves in the minds of the people who walk by our schools but are not invited in. According to Canadian law, the school must: prepare individuals for effective involvement in the economic life of the community; provide a minumum knowledge of basic skills necessary for participatory citizenship; and provide for "enjoyment". Since people are so diversified culturally, geographically, and economically, it should be obvious that there is no panacea that will work for all. Effective economic involvement can only be achieved at the local level, for local schools can best identify the economic needs of the community. Basic skills are important, but how and to what degree they are to be pursued are questions to be answered by local educators. "Enjoyment", defined as the fine arts, must be made to include Indian arts. It is important that Indian students acquire the necessary skills, tools, and knowledge for participation in the larger society but they must also be afforded the strength and wisdom of their past. (JC)

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MONOGRAPH NO. SIX

THE EDUCATION OF OUR NATIVE CHILDREN

by

Cecil King

Mr. King is Director of the Indian Teacher Education Program, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon.

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The purpose of this monograph is to share information and ideas associated with Indian and northern education.

Address correspondence to:

Indian and Northern Education Program
College of Education
University of Saskatchewan
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, S7N 0W0

The Education of Our Native Children

by

Cecil King

We meet together this year to effectively share our aims and ideas toward a new educational system. We now are in a better position than ever to do this.

Facilities which have been closed in the past are now open to us. There is a growing body of usable research available in native history and traditions. New curricula and supportive materials are being developed. Native people are joining the teacher force across the country.

Because of the precarious economic, social and spiritual situation of the white society, the white population at large can be more receptive to the teaching of traditional native values that support life in a holistic sense.

We can begin to hope for the time when such painful decisions as Poundmaker, Chief of Crees, had to make in the name of education will not face every Indian parent. In the middle of the 1800's he said:

> "Nearly two years since I sent my son to St. Albert, Big Lake School; my heart was sick when I saw my boy crying at his departure from me, and I find long the time of his absence; but he is at school some day he will be able to help himself, to help his fellow men. He will be able to speak English and French and he will be able to read and to write, besides, know how to work like a white man. Do the same for your children, if you want them to prosper and be happy." (1)

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(1) Report in the Saskatchewan Herald, Battleford, Sask., January 21, 1882.

But we are only too aware that under this system our children did not prosper and were not happy. Even today, we see that over half of the 25,000 Indians living in this country are under 20 years of age, and yet less than half of our educable youth remain in school.

Perhaps we should have listened to one of the chiefs of the Six Nations who wrote to the College of William and Mary in Virginia in 1774.

> Dear Sir:
>
> We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those colleges, and that the maintenance of our young men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, therefore, that you mean to do us good by your proposal and we thank you heartily.
>
> But, you, who are wise, must know that different nations have different conceptions of things; and you will not therefore take it amiss, if your ideas of this kind of education happen not to be the same with ours. We have had some experience of it; several of our young people were formerly brought up at the colleges of the northern provinces; they were instructed in all your sciences; but when they came back to us, they were bad runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods, unable to bear either cold or hunger, knew neither how to build a cabin, take a deer, nor kill an enemy, spoke our language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for hunters, warriors, nor counsellors; they were totally good for nothing.
>
> We are however not the less obligated by your kind offer, though we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful sense of it, if the gentlemen of Virginia will send us a dozen of their sons, we will take care of their education, instruct them in all we know, and make men of them. (2)

While this chief recognized the need for the sciences and academic advancements of the white man's educational system, he also retained a belief in the strengths of the educational system of his own people. He saw the need for building the future on youth who were knowledgeable in

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(2) Ben Franklin's Pamphlet, Remarks Concerning Savages of North America, 1784.

the skills and the ways of the past and yet were reaching out into the modern world of their time.

Now, when you stop to think, these people were ncerned about their education 200 years ago. How much farther ahead are we today in our thinking?

Too often our approach to the problems of Indian education has been to focus entirely on the negative examples from the past. Too often we focus solely on what is wrong with it and then we often are forced to question what is wrong with us that we cannot fit into the educational system. We use a whole litany of rationalizations to excuse us from responsibility. We talk about the drop-out. We talk about the age-grade retardations. We talk about the lack of parental involvement. We talk about irrelevant curricula, insensitive teachers, and inadequate schools. It is so easy to belabor the obvious problems and place the blame on others rather than search for strengths within ourselves to deal effectively with the education of our youth.

I am not here to talk of the problems in Indian education in terms of the negative and the injustices of the past. I am here to speak in terms of the positive and the possibilities for the future.

This does not mean that the past can be ignored for it may after all be that in the past is where the Indian's future may lie. When we see the trends of today, we find the Indian more and more looking to the past for his future.

Our generation may have lost touch with the values and traditions of our once proud heritage. But, our young people are looking to the past for the very things that we have lost. In the vernacular, they are

telling us to get off our asses, stop our bitching and do something to bring those values of the past into the future.

Recent years have seen the re-emergence of the trappings of the past - moccasins, beadwork, headbands, crafts, etc. The proliferation of the market to appeal to the curiosity of the tourist seems to be the only purpose behind these efforts. Surely this is not the essence of Indian culture? There is a need for us, as educators, to get beneath the superficiality of the museum approach to Indian life so that we may present the youth with the wisdom they desire to deal with modern life in pride and dignity.

It is good to see our young people attending Indian ceremonials and proudly taking part. It is good to hear our language becoming the first language. It is good to hear Indian music echoing in hallways and Indian art vividly displaying the ways of our forefathers on the walls of our schools. With the realization that our present educational system is incapable of helping our youth in their search for meaning, and with the realization that it does not have the knowledge that is required to satisfy our youth of today, it is good to hear Indian people saying, "We want to control our schools".

It can be done. The knowledge we seek is still alive on the reserves; in the minds of people who walk by the school and are not invited in. It is in the minds of old people who sit and dream at home, forgotten. They are a resource that is available to you.

Our forefathers had a world view based on the assumption that Man was weak. The Maker was foremost and the Earth, his wife, became the mother of all the environment. The natural children were the plants. The animals were our brothers and sisters. The order of things could not

only exist without Man, but Man is totally dependent upon it. As a result, Man held great respect for nature. This spiritual domain influenced our daily lives. Contact with the spiritual world was through the medicine man and spiritual intermediaries. This view of the super-natural world which placed Man in a frail and subservient position might be compared with western civilization's view of Man as the manipulator of the environment.

Students should be given the opportunity to examine Indian values along with western values; then, to select the good values of both Indian and non-Indian cultures and put these values to work within the framework of their own daily lives, goals and ambitions. Inclusion of aspects of our past culture into the educational system would give recognition to the right of our youth to take pride in their heritage. Awareness of one's historical origins and a sense of historical racial pride are the primary source and basis for an individual's personal identity. We must recognize this as a prime element in Indian education and teach the Indian child a clear, solid, thoroughly taught history of his race.

It is common knowledge that classroom history texts have not been overly generous in their treatment of native peoples. The common defense was, "But that's all that's available!". If that was ever a good excuse, it is no good now.

Curriculum projects and supportive materials from the Indian perspective are being initiated all across North America. I have brought a mailing list of such with me and have a limited number available for you today.

The age of the plastocine canoe, construction paper feathers, and the brown paper teepee must end.

I would like to say a brief word to teachers about the future expectations that Indian people have of them. Clive Linklater, of the National Indian Brotherhood, noted the following characteristics of teachers in an ideal system of Indian education.

> "In the world as we want it to be, the teachers, particularly if they are white, will think of Indian people as people who are as educable and as thirsty for knowledge as any other people can be.
>
> In the world as we want it to be, the teachers will think of themselves as people whose role is to stimulate, to agitate other people to the full use of their faculties, and will not set themselves up as the accumulators and infallible purveyors of all the past wisdom of all the past ages.
>
> In the world as we want it to be, the teachers will learn how to deal in ideas, emotions, cultural differences, individual pacing, mind stimulation and soul-searching. The human person is not only an intellectual being, but a spiritual being, and the schools must serve the student's soul as well as his mind." (3)

I would hazard that any conscientious teacher is aware of these things and has heard them many times. The ultimate question then is, "How can we achieve the world as we want it to be?" and what, if anything, are we actually doing? What can we do?

The Indian is coming of age in the educational system of today. An effective Indian educational system must be aware of the many ramifications of our children's current world.

Our children have expectations beyond any local realities. Our educational system must provide them with the opportunity to find an

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(3) Clive Linklater, "The World As It Was; The World As It Is; The World As We Want It To Be", Teacher Education Programs for Native People, edited by M. Aldous, D. Barnett, C. King, Saskatoon: Research Resources Centre, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, 1974, pp. 8-9.

identity for themselves within the world of the present. Today's educators need to realize that modern Indian youth are no longer limited to experiences near their homes and on reservations. Through radio and television they are much more aware of the world than we were as children. Today's mobility allows our youth to travel far distances. Today's technology allows immediate gratification of their wishes. Today's youth are constantly propelled into the future and they are impatient with the world as it is.

I admire the young people for their striving for something better, for the strength of the conviction they must have in reaching out for that meaning that they know is out there and the energy with which they pursue this search. When one sees all this potential waiting and wanting to move, it is hard to explain why greater things are not happening.

However, the very impatience of our youth for change and their reaching out into the ideal world just beyond their grasp tends to make them reject, if not rebel, against the too slow plodding progress of the present. It is not difficult to understand the frustrations. And yet in understanding the cause of their frustration, why cannot the educational system catch up to them? This failure of the educational system heightens already existing frustrations and young people respond by channelling their creative energies into destructive responses. They become bitter, militant, despondent or passive.

I would like to read a poem written by a Mohawk boy which illustrates the effect of the modern world on our youth.

Indian mother attempts suicide
....(but the party goes on.)

A baby is born in the back seat
of a car on the way to town
....(but the party goes on.)

An Indian grandmother sits
in a rest home without visitors
....while Indian students travel a
thousand miles to a conference on
Indian unity....(and the party goes on.)

A young Odawa ties off, preparing to
get dooown....(and the party goes on.)

An unemployed Indian struggles
to see his family make it through
the winter....while the college
student picks up a cool three grand
and proclaims...."I will return
and help my people."

A language dies from neglect....
and the party goes on.

A young Indian drinks "to be Indian"
while Odawa songs and dances die
for lack of interest.

Indian students face the same white
faces year after year....
(the party goes on.)

Rotten leases are written
Indian rights are ripped off
a reservation is turned into a lake for progress
the IAB continues controlling the land
an Indian freezes to death in an
  abandoned car surrounded by
  empty wine bottles
young girls feel they have "freedom"
because they can party at Anchor Inn
the whole Indian population gets fat
but undernourished on bread and
  potatoes:
IAB workers sip coffee and
damn Indian militants
a glue-crazed boy shoots his brother
....(but the party goes on.)

"AND THEN I'M GOING TO
RETURN TO HELP MY PEOPLE"

With love to our Indian college students
who are going to be our future
leaders, teachers, doctors, lawyers

....when the party's over. (4)

Chief David Ahenakew expressed similar thoughts recently.

> "I, too, feel sad at the change that has come in the attitudes and values of the young in Indian society. I feel sad and angry at the young when I see them acting helpless and dependent, when they do not stand up with pride, when they do not have the convictions of a good moral character as was true for our people in the past. Many of our young are becoming selfish through laziness; they plead for sympathy mouthing the jargon of the white man's psychology. For such in my community I have no excuse, and I offer no alibis for them." (5)

However, we should not become disheartened when we see those things in the education of our youth that are not as desirable as we might hope. This is not the total picture. There are too many positive things happening in education today to dwell on the past misfortunes and cliches of negativism.

Indian people are taking control of their children's education. One needs only to look at the rising number of examples of local control of education as well as the many programs in teacher training for native people. Even in those areas where the concept of local control is not yet a reality, we see more Indian involvement - in school committees, teacher-aide programs, language teaching, etc. But local control offers far greater opportunities for change. Let's consider for a moment the

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(4) Daniel R. Bonberry, Akwesasne Notes, vol. 4, no. 3, Spring, 1972.

(5) David Ahenakew, The Indian and Education. Saskatoon: Indian and Northern Education Program, Univ. of Saskatchewan, Monograph No. 2, 1974.

actual realities and then some of the possibilities for immediate developments.

The educational system is emerging with a new image. It reflects Indian involvement. More native people are visible in the schools - at the local level as teachers, principals, language, history and culture experts, etc. At the district level or regional level, Indians are taking administrative positions and Indian people are becoming increasingly evident in all our institutions of learning.

We have talked about the realities. Now, within this context, let us ask ourselves what is the purpose of a school. According to Canadian law, which is the frame of reference we are forced to use, a school must (1) prepare the individual to be effectively involved in the economic life of the country, (2) provide for a minimum knowledge of the basic skills for full participation as a citizen of Canada, and (3) provide something termed "enjoyment".

We know that native people are diversified culturally but do we also consider the fact that they are diversified geographically and economically. If we consider this diversity, there is such a tremendous difference between the north and south and the east and west that to prescribe the panacea which would work for them all, the school that would serve all in the same way, is perhaps what has been wrong with the system from the start. No school run from the outside has ever actually recognized or considered the local differences or responded to the local needs.

Keeping this factor in mind, the purpose of a school - to prepare the individual to be effectively involved within economic life of the country -- can only be effectively dealt with at the local level. Native

people aspire for better things; but what is better for one group or area may not necessarily be the same for the other. To get a job, to be employable, means having marketable skills. But today it is not only that; it is the recognition of a personal responsibility to change the current situations that propel these individuals into the realm of professional vocations. Schools under local control recognize the local needs, and therefore the programs in those schools must necessarily be geared to give the native scholar the alternatives to choose and attain those sills so important to exist in the other world. School curricula under local control must generate a pride and a confidence in self so that when the individual either succeeds or fails, he does have the strength to go on.

The second factor, for the purpose of a school, and keeping in mind the native in education, the second step says - to provide for minimum knowledge of the basic skills for full participation as a citizen of Canada. What does this mean? Simply, one must know how to read, to write, to do math and understand scientifically his environment. The need for these skills exist for all and we should not change that. However, in math two and two make four. This is a fact but our concern is that those methods and skills we learn will enable us to depend on that result - that by whatever method we manage to add two and two, we are sure the answer will be four. Reading is a progressive skill and an extension of verbal communication - writing is the extension of reading. These skills are basic to all human beings in the educational struggle. How they are pursued and to what degree are the questions to be answered by local educators.

The third factor - school should provide something termed "enjoyment". "Enjoyment" has been defined by the present school system as meaning "fine arts". It offers an opportunity for Indian schools to present Indian music along with Beethoven and Mozart. Indian art could be studied along side of Rembrandt and Michaelangelo. Indian philosophy could be analyzed with Aristotle and Socrates. Indian religion should be examined with Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Indian students need to see the cultural aspects of their own society and study traditional, transitional and modern examples to gain enjoyment and to gain pride in the immense wealth and beauty of their own traditions.

It is important that the school serve these three basic purposes. It is important that Indian students not be short-changed. They must receive all the advantages for acquiring the skills, tools and knowledge necessary to participate in the larger society but they must also be given the strength and wisdom of their past. It has been said that if we control our own education, we cannot do any worse than those in the past but that is a negative approach. Now that we have the opportunity, let's do not only a good job or an adequate job but the best job possible.